

FOR JANE FONDA, THOSE DAYS ON 'GOLDEN POND' BROUGHT HER AND HER DAD TOGETHER AT LAST

UP FRONT

It happened in the nostalgic light of a New Hampshire summer, the season when loons arch and dip over Squam Lake and the wild flowers take over the land. In this pastoral setting, Henry Fonda and his daughter, Jane, spent the first extended period of their adult lives together making a movie. At the start of that reunion, made all the more intimidating by the presence of Katharine Hepburn, Jane admits, "I was very nervous. I tended to overact in the beginning and I threw up a lot." Her father, characteristically, was as serene about it all as the glass-smooth lake. "That's what's so scary about him—nothing seems to faze him," she says. "He arrives on time and knows his lines. He sits and waits like an empty vessel and when they need him he fills up, does his thing and sits down."

Last week, while Henry sat, the world stood and cheered him on the occasion of an Academy Award—the first Oscar of his near half century in Hollywood—for what may very well be his last film, *On Golden Pond*. Last year Fonda attended the ceremonies to accept an honorary Oscar. But this year, now 76 and suffering from a severe heart condition, he watched from his Bel Air home with wife Shirlee (see story, page 32) at his side. As Jane (who lost in the Best Supporting Actress category) accepted the award for her father, Henry blushed and cried. Later, when Jane and the Fonda grandchildren rushed over in the family station wagon to deliver the precious hunk of metal, Fonda admitted that he wasn't really all that surprised. "It was in the wind," he smiled. While Shirlee hovered over him, Henry said softly that, no, he didn't think he would ever act again.

The road to *Golden Pond* began in 1979, when Jane was filming *The Electric Horseman* in Utah. In one sitting, she read the script of the Broadway play and was deeply moved by Ernest Thompson's story of the cantankerous



MARY ELLEN MARK/LEE GROSS

retired Yankee professor Norman Thayer and his adoring wife during what may be their last summer at their lakeside camp. Jane had been searching for a movie to do with her father for years, in part to get to know him better. She found that *Golden Pond* even had a character that resembled her—the Thayers' daughter, Chelsea, who had been estranged from her father since childhood. "I could hear my father's voice saying those words," Jane recalls of her initial reaction to the play. "The grouchiness is real, and the difficulty in seeing that one can cause suffering for someone else—that's true of my dad. He doesn't always know when he's hurt somebody."

Unlike the warring Norman and Chelsea, says Jane, she and her father have had "only two limited periods of real conflict"—at the beginning of her film career and at the height of her antiwar activism in the early 1970s. Yet, inevitably, acting with her father for the first time since a brief joint stage appearance at the Omaha Community Playhouse when she was 18 set loose all the buried, unspoken conflicts in their complicated relationship. While filming a scene which showed the bristling hostility between Norman

Katharine Hepburn, who had never met Henry Fonda before *On Golden Pond*, kept relations between father and daughter on an even keel.

and Chelsea, for example, Jane felt she and her father needed to look each other in the eye for a closeup. "I don't need to see you—I'm not one of those actors," Henry growled. "I was furious," remembers Jane. "I felt like crying and the other side of me was saying: 'Great! These are the emotions Chelsea is feeling.'" But it was more than that. "I'm 44 years old and still he can reduce me to feeling abject helplessness."

Jane's comforter—in the film and on the set—was Kate Hepburn, 72, who was later to win an unprecedented fourth Oscar as Best Actress for her performance as Norman Thayer's wife, Ethel. "She put her arm on me and said: 'Don't be upset. Spence [Spencer Tracy, Hepburn's longtime love and acting partner] used to do that to me all the time.'"

During their three months at Squam Lake, Henry and Shirlee Fonda and Jane and husband Tom Hayden, who is now in a campaign for Assemblyman in Los Angeles, got to know each other

"This has to be one of the high points of my life," said Henry when Jane arrived at his home with the Oscar.

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